The Hadramawt Standoff: Tribal Autonomy, External Patronage, and the Future of Yemen's Oil Corridor

Smuggling, Counterterrorism, or Expansion What Is Behind the Power Struggle in Hadramawt.

In late 2025, Hadramawt stopped being a quiet backwater in Yemen's long war and became the place where almost every national fault line now intersects. At the center stand Amr bin Habreesh and the Hadramawt Protection Forces (HPF), a tribal-based coalition rooted in the Hadramawt Tribes Confederacy (HTC). Opposing them are forces backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and aligned with the Southern Transitional Council (STC), including the Hadrami Elite Forces (HEF) and the Security Support Brigade (SSB) under Brigadier General Saleh bin Al Sheikh Abu Bakr, widely known as Abu Ali Al Hadrami. Circling these rival blocs are Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the Houthis, and a weakened internationally recognized government (IRG), each with its own ambitions.

The central question is what this confrontation is truly about. Is it, as some STC-UAE narratives claim, an operation to dismantle alleged smuggling networks associated with Bin Habreesh and impose tighter control over cross-desert smuggling routes? Is it a counterterrorism push aimed at containing renewed AQAP activity in the Wadi and along the key oil corridors? Or is it, as many Hadramis now fear, a broader STC-UAE effort to extend full control over all of Hadramawt ahead of any future settlement with the Houthis?

Methodology: This article draws on open-source reporting and interviews with four senior Hadrami figures and two Western officials to map the current balance of forces, trace the developments that led to this moment, and outline the most plausible scenarios for what may follow, with particular attention to how extremist actors such as AQAP and the Houthis are seeking to exploit the crisis.

All three explanations overlap, and that ambiguity is part of what fuels the crisis. In a governorate as vast and strategically layered as Hadramawt, smuggling, counterterrorism, and political consolidation are tightly intertwined rather than separate issues. The struggle now underway is not only about Bin Habreesh

or a single security force; it is about who will ultimately shape the political future of Yemen's largest governorate — and with it, the balance of power in the entire south.

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Saudi media and influencers have increasingly framed Bin Habreesh as an authentic defender of Hadrami rights, amplifying his interviews, including a recent appearance on BBC Arabic where he described what he calls an external tribal invasion backed by the UAE.

Emirati and STC aligned media, by contrast, openly celebrate the deployment of UAE equipped units along the N4 coastal highway, including convoys of Streit Spartan, Typoon, and SUT armored vehicles and busloads of fighters from Yafe', al-Dhale', Abyan, Shabwah, and other southern governorates. The result is that Hadramawt today looks less like a marginal governroate and more like the main arena of Saudi-Emirati competition inside Yemen.

For years, Hadramawt was held up as one of Yemen's few islands of stability, a governorate where critical infrastructure projects could move forward despite the wider conflict. Initiatives like the rehabilitation of the Al-Hami fishery landing site, completed in late 2025 with support from UNDP and the World Bank, symbolized this stability by improving livelihoods, strengthening value chains, and reinforcing the governorate's reputation for security and predictability.

But the current political and military tensions, clashes around PetroMasila, and rival mobilizations by tribal and UAE-backed forces now threaten that image. These developments challenge the notion that Hadramawt can remain insulated from Yemen's broader instability and raise serious questions about the future security, governance, and economic resilience of the governorate.

From Sa'd to Amr: How a Tribal Arbitration Created a New Power Broker

To understand the current moment around PetroMasila and Mukalla, it is necessary to go back to 2013, when army forces killed Sheikh Sa'd bin Habreesh, the leader of the Hamoum tribe, in Sayoun. The killing triggered a large tribal mobilization and the creation of what became the Hadramawt Tribes Alliance. Tribes erected checkpoints, threatened oil infrastructure, and announced what they called a popular habah or uprising for Hadramawt's rights.

The alliance, quickly transformed the likes of Hadramawt Tribal Confederacy (HTC) from a protest framework into a political actor. It gathered not only tribes from the valley and desert but also hashemites, religious scholars, business figures, urban notables, and representatives from almost all major Hadrami tribal groupings, including the Hamoum, Kinda, Al Shanafir, Nahd, Bani Murra, Bani Dhunna, Al Nuʿman, Noah, Sayban, Yafa of Hadramawt, Thaʿyeen, Al Awabitha, and Balʿubeid. It formalized a Presidency Council of around 100 figures and an Executive Council of 22, giving it a quasi institutional face.

The key political moment came when the government agreed to settle the crisis through tribal arbitration. Mediators later described how the state submitted to the arbitration of the HTC, providing what tribal custom calls the 'adl, a guarantee that the state will implement the ruling. The 'adl in this case reportedly

included one billion riyals, more than 200 rifles, and a fleet of vehicles. At the same time, President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi endorsed the HTC's core demands, such as giving Hadramis priority in security positions and oil company jobs and addressing local grievances.

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Tribal Economies and Smuggling: How the Desert Pays for Politics

Sources in Hadramawt and Western officials familiar with the area consistently describe the tribes around Amr bin Habreesh, particularly in the Hamoum heartland near Ghayl bin Yameen and the desert corridors, as deeply involved in internal smuggling. This includes fuel, consumer goods, and possibly weapons and other contraband moving between Oman, Mahra, Hadramawt, and inland governorates.

Locally, this is not viewed as an aberration but as part of the long term survival strategy of desert communities. Weak state presence, porous borders, and the collapse of formal economic opportunities have made smuggling a core livelihood. Some interlocutors argue that Bin Habreesh personally benefits from these networks as a tribal patron and arbiter, while others emphasize that the economy is broader than one man. Either way, the reality is that these informal revenue streams give his camp access to cash, vehicles, arms, and loyal fighters in a way that formal institutions in Yemen's current fiscal crisis simply cannot match.

These networks also shape how regional actors view him. For Saudi Arabia, which has long countered smuggling along its southern frontier, a tribal actor who can control or redirect flows on the N4-N5 corridor has uses as well as risks. For the UAE and the STC, smuggling is both a critique and a security concern, especially when they accuse his forces of facilitating drug and arms trafficking at checkpoints that sit outside formal state supervision.

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Mapping the New Front Line: N5 for Saudi Arabia, N4 for the UAE

Hadramawt's geography now mirrors the division of external influence.

The northern interior, centered on the N5 highway that runs from the Shahan crossing with Oman through Mahra and on to Sayoun and Ma'rib, forms a Saudi influenced belt. This region is closer to the Saudi border, hosts National Shield forces (NSF) and First Military Region Command (MRC) units, and connects to tribal networks that have long histories with Riyadh.

The southern coastal belt, centered on the N4 highway that runs from Aden through Mukalla toward the Mahra border, has become the core of UAE influence. Along this route lie Aden, the temporary capital of the IRG, Mukalla, the Dabbah or Shihr oil export terminal, Bir Ali and Nushaymah in Shabwa, and a

chain of coastal bases and checkpoints. Here the UAE has trained and equipped the HEF and the SSB, and it backs the STC as its main political partner.

PetroMasila sits between these two belts. The fields around blocks 10, 14, and 53 are inland enough to be within reach of tribal forces, yet logistically connected to the coastal export in Dabbah and Nushaymah infrastructure that the UAE-backed STC units dominate.

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The Emirati Footprint: Abu Ali, MRAPs, and the Security Support Brigades

The most visible symbol of the UAE backed camp in Hadramawt is Brigadier General Saleh bin Al Sheikh Abu Bakr, a.k.a. Abu Ali Al Hadrami. As commander of the SSB associated with the HEF, he appears in videos meeting tribes, reviewing units, and inspecting positions near Al Meshqas and Wadi Do'an. Backing him, observers have noted convoys of Streit Group armored vehicles, produced by a UAE based company, and long convoys of buses bringing fighters in from other southern governorates.

Abu Ali al-Hadhrami is a long-standing and often debated figure in southern Yemeni political and military networks. He emerged from a Salafi environment in eastern Hadramawt, with a long record of involvement in southern political and armed movements. According to multiple accounts, he recruited fighters from al-Dhale', Lahj, and Aden who support the STC, trained them at the STC's Jabal Hadid base, and then deployed them to coastal areas in southern and southwestern Hadramawt, where they are currently concentrated in bases such as the Barshid Brigade base in Broom Mayfa'. Al-Hadhrami recently appeared in meetings with Hadrami leaders, warning of what he described as agendas seeking to destabilize the governorate. This appearance marks his first significant public reemergence since 2016 after years of maintaining a low profile.

His earlier career includes serving as an adviser and office staffer to former Vice President Ali Salem al-Beidh beginning in 1995, and participating in the Self-Determination Movement (HATM), the armed wing of the southern secessionist movement known as Hirak, which carried out operations during the 1990s. Reports indicate that the movement received support from Iran and that some of its members trained with Hezbollah in Beirut, while coordinated recruitment activities took place in al-Dhale' Lahj, Aden, and Shabwa.

The group established covert cells involved in armed attacks against government targets. Al-Hadhrami also managed the Aden Live channel, created with support from Hezbollah as a media platform for the separatist movement. After the outbreak of the civil war in 2014, he shifted his alignment toward the UAE, later working as an adviser to Aidarous al-Zubaidi during his tenure as governor of Aden and helping establish early STC-linked security units before stepping back from public activity due to local and external pressures.

These forces are not just a deterrent display. The scale of the mobilization, the presence of heavy machine guns and armored transport, and the steady movement of units toward key junctions suggest a deployment intended to stay in place and shape the security order along the N4 and N5 over the short term. The Security Support Brigades present themselves as a formal arm of the Hadrami Elite Forces and as protectors of state institutions against “outlaw groups” and “illegal checkpoints”. Their critics see them as an extension of the STC and a tool for entrenching Emirati influence along the coast.

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Abu Ali’s main rival is Amr bin Habreesh, who is widely perceived as a Saudi aligned tribal leader and who has been photographed with Saudi defense minister Khaled bin Salman and senior Saudi officers after being flown to Riyadh aboard a Saudi military aircraft. In the local narrative, Abu Ali represents an Emirati backed coastal security project, while bin Habreesh represents inland tribes who feel they are defending their home territory and resources.

Bin Habreesh’s Case: What He Says He Is Fighting For and the Consequences of His Actions

In his public statements, including his interview with BBC Arabic that Saudi aligned media widely amplified, Bin Habreesh presents his actions as defensive and legitimate. He describes large tribal forces arriving from al-Dhale’ and Yafe’, backed from outside, taking control of coastal positions including the Arabian Sea Dabbah Oil Port, replacing local elements in the HEF, and threatening to dominate the Dabbah terminal and then PetroMasila.

He frames his seizure of PetroMasila as a preemptive step to protect state owned facilities from what he calls tribal militias from outside the governorate. He repeats that his forces are on their own land, defending their own oil wealth, and that they are not aggressors but responding to an external incursion. Bin Habreesh rejects accusations that he is aligned with Iran or the Houthis, insisting on his Hadrami and Arab identity and positioning his movement as one that seeks self governance for Hadramawt within the Yemeni political equation.

For some Hadramis, this resonates as a response to state failure. For others, it looks like the replacement of one patronage network with another that is closer to a single tribal bloc.

On the economic front, he echoes earlier claims made in previous interviews that PetroMasila fuel allocations are riddled with corruption, that subsidized fuel is diverted or resold, and that both Aden and Mukalla suffer from chronic power cuts despite decades of oil revenues. His solution is more direct tribal oversight of distribution, commissions that track tankers from loading to delivery, and public posting of fuel shipment data to increase transparency. For some Hadramis, this resonates as a response to state failure. For others, it looks like the replacement of one patronage network with another that is closer to a single tribal bloc.

PetroMasila reports that it halted all production and refining operations at Block 10 after security conditions around the facilities deteriorated to a point that triggered force majeure protocols. The

company states that continued operations risked catastrophic ignition of stored crude and gas due to armed clashes near tanks and processing infrastructure.

PetroMasila kept a minimal production workflow running to sustain gas supplies for the 75 MW Wadi Hadramawt Gas Power Plant and the Al Jazeera Gas Plant, but by 6 p.m. on November 29 security checkpoints prevented tanker movements, making further fuel delivery impossible. As a result, gas feedstock for both power stations stopped, and the company initiated controlled shutdown procedures for gas units and related electrical systems. PetroMasila emphasizes that its response aligns with industrial safety norms for hydrocarbon facilities and warns that resuming operations depends entirely on restoring a secure perimeter and guaranteed ground access for fuel transport.

Vice President Faraj Al-Bahsani condemned the recent actions led by Bin Habreesh and allied tribal groups, describing their formation of armed units outside state authority and their seizure of PetroMasila as an “unacceptable act of rebellion and sabotage.” He warned that such unlawful armed formations have long been a source of instability and stressed that the current crisis is a direct consequence of the IRG and the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) failing to confront these violations earlier. Al-Bahsani stated that the takeover attempt caused serious harm to public life, including electricity outages and disruption of fuel supplies to Hadramawt and neighboring governorates. He affirmed that those responsible must be brought to justice.

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Raising the issue of AQAP was also central to the Hadramawt Inclusive Council (HIC), which aligns politically with Saudi interests in northern Hadramawt and supports the HTC and HPF while countering STC and UAE messaging. The Council warned the international community that the recent entry of southern forces into the governorate without legal justification threatens the stability maintained since Mukalla’s liberation in 2016. It accused IRG officials of facilitating the deployment of these forces without naming them or the UAE. According to the Council, the incoming units took over bases, removed Hadrami commanders, and attempted to impose a political project while seeking to seize oil facilities and key state institutions.

[HIC] called for international intervention to demand the withdrawal of all external forces and argued that only the HEF, the 2nd MRC, the HPF, and local security units are legitimate protectors of the governorate.

The HIC said Hadrami groups secured the PetroMasila oil fields as a precaution, recalling their similar role during the 2016 Al-Qaeda crisis. It called for international intervention to demand the withdrawal of all external forces and argued that only the HEF, the 2nd MRC, the HPF, and local security units are

legitimate protectors of the governorate. The Council reaffirmed longstanding but unimplemented Hadrami demands, rejected any attempt to impose political projects by force, and urged continued international support to preserve stability and prevent a return to security gaps that terrorist groups have exploited.

AQAP's Calculus: Owning the Uprising Without Owning the Risk

AQAP has not initiated the current crisis in Hadramawt, but it is working hard to insert itself into the narrative. In recent statements and audio messages, the group has praised the unrest as the beginning of a broader liberation from what it calls tyrannical and externally controlled authorities. It points back to its own short period of rule in Mukalla in 2015 and 2016, describing it as a model of efficient governance and religious authenticity, and urges Yemenis to take up arms, train, and reject government economic measures as manipulated by foreign actors.

This is classic AQAP messaging. It tries to wrap itself in the language of justice, anti corruption, and resistance to foreign interference, while calling for full implementation of its own doctrine. It presents the uprising in Hadramawt as the first step in a national campaign that should spread to other governorates. It urges scholars and preachers to delegitimize what it calls hypocritical elites and warns Yemenis not to be distracted by any partial concessions on exchange rates or services.

If formal security structures fragment further and front lines harden, the desert corridors and lightly governed spaces where bin Habreesh's tribal networks operate could provide opportunities for AQAP to piggyback on local resentment, offer training or funding to splinter groups, or stage attacks that further undermine central authority.

There is no credible evidence that AQAP controls major territory in the current crisis zones around PetroMasila or Mukalla. Its messaging, however, matters. If formal security structures fragment further and front lines harden, the desert corridors and lightly governed spaces where bin Habreesh's tribal networks operate could provide opportunities for AQAP to piggyback on local resentment, offer training or funding to splinter groups, or stage attacks that further undermine central authority.

U.S. military reporting confirms that American forces were deployed to Hadramawt during the battle against AQAP. In recent years, the Pentagon publicly acknowledged that a "small number" of U.S. troops were on the ground in Mukalla, Hadramawt, providing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) support, operational planning, medical assistance, and aerial refueling. Their deployment aimed to help HEF and UAE forces retake the port city, which AQAP had turned into a major revenue hub and safe haven for planning attacks against the United States. The U.S. government considered the AQAP presence in Hadramawt a direct threat to American national security, making the governorate a focal point of U.S. counterterrorism engagement.

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The Houthi View: A Saudi Emirati Dispute Over Spoils

The Houthis, for their part, see Hadramawt as an example of what they describe as a Saudi-Emirati struggle over influence and wealth. Public figures such as Mohammed al Bukhaiti have called the current

fighting a futile conflict between two external patrons who will eventually settle their differences in a way that divides resources between themselves. He states that Ansarallah (Houthis) sympathizes with Hadrami communities against what he calls pro-UAE militias but says any Houthi intervention would only come under a wider project to restore Yemeni sovereignty from Sa'dah to Mahra.

Other Houthi politicians, like Salim al-Moghales, use the crisis to criticize STC leader Aidarous al Zubaidi for building forces heavily skewed toward fighters from al-Dhale', Yafe', and Radfan, claiming that this reproduces an old pattern where military units become regional rather than national armies. Houthis argue that moving those units into Hadramawt makes them look like invading militias, a framing intended to undercut their legitimacy in the eyes of Hadramis.

The Houthis are not currently in a position to project conventional military power into Hadramawt's core. Their goal is political. By casting the conflict as a Gulf proxy struggle over oil, they hope to position themselves as the only force claiming a national, sovereign agenda, even while benefiting from any further fragmentation that weakens the government, the STC, or Saudi aligned actors.

Between Rumors of Oman Ties and the Reality of His Saudi Alliance

Inside Hadramawt, the narrative around Bin Habreesh is far from uniform. Some tribal and political figures accuse him of monopolizing the HTC treating it as a personal fief, and using it for leverage to secure financial and political gains. Local accounts, often carried in partisan media, allege that his associates traveled to Oman in 2023 with figures such as Ali al-Hurayzi from Mahra, met with Houthi representatives, and agreed on escalatory plans targeting the Saudi-UAE coalition in exchange for financial support. These accounts claim that he later visited Salalah, met Omani officials and senior Houthi figures, and, after returning, issued a sharply worded statement against the coalition.

None of these claims can be independently verified from open sources, and they clearly serve the interests of his rivals. Still, they circulate widely in Hadrami circles and feed into a broader perception among some elites that he has become unpredictable, willing to pressure any external actor, and prepared to balance between Riyadh, Muscat, and even Houthi-controlled Sana'a if it enhances his position. From his side, he insists that he remains an independent Hadrami political actor and rejects accusations of being an instrument of any foreign power.

On 21 March 2025, he met with Prince Khaled bin Salman, the Saudi Minister of Defense, along with General Fahd bin Hamad Al-Salman, the commander of the Saudi Joint Forces.

In fact, beyond the Omani connections often mentioned, Bin Habreesh is widely viewed as a close Saudi ally. On 21 March 2025, he met with Prince Khaled bin Salman, the Saudi Minister of Defense, along with General Fahd bin Hamad Al-Salman, the commander of the Saudi Joint Forces. He was flown to Riyadh by the Saudi Air Force on a Beechcraft Super King Air departing from Al-Rayan Airport — treatment that reflects the status of a staunch ally of the Kingdom.

At the same time, the HTC is itself splintering. One faction remains loyal to bin Habreesh. Another, aligned with the STC, has moved to reorganize the confederacy and has appointed Sheikh Khalid Mohammed bin Mutlaq al Kathiri as its head, arguing that the body is a registered institution that should not belong to a single tribe or family. This institutional fragmentation increases the risk that disputes over

representation, rather than only disputes over oil, could trigger new rounds of confrontation.

The Slow-Reacting Government: Why State Institutions Remained Silent Before Responding

Throughout the escalation, the institutions of the IRG have been unusually quiet. Parliament has not issued strong statements. Ministries have stayed vague. Even some members of the PLC have tread carefully. Interviews suggest that this silence is less about lack of concern and more about fear of backlash. The STC and its allies control Aden, the seat of the IRG, and hold significant coercive power in the south. Challenging them publicly over Hadramawt could invite obstruction of government work, pressure on officials, or even moves to physically block access to the capital.

Late last night, a readout was issued of President Alimi's phone call with the governor of Hadramawt, widely seen as a direct response to the unfolding events. The statement positions the presidency firmly against Bin Habreesh's recent actions without naming him, voicing full support for the local authority and security committee, stressing the need to defend state institutions and their exclusive powers, and warning that further escalation will endanger civilians and deepen instability.

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By urging political, tribal, and social actors to rally behind the official local leadership rather than tribal mobilizations, the readout is broadly interpreted as an implicit rejection of Bin Habreesh's challenge to state authority. President Alimi's most visible step has been the removal of Governor Mabkhout bin Madi, who had taken an increasingly confrontational stance toward Bin Habreesh, and the appointment of Salem Ahmed Saeed al-Khanbashi, a veteran political figure with a background in the Socialist Party and later the GPC, and experience as governor, deputy prime minister, and Shura Council member. His appointment signals an attempt to bring in a figure with wider networks who might manage the crisis more deftly, but his actual authority remains constrained as long as real power on the ground rests with armed formations aligned with Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, or tribal councils rather than the governor's office.

The newly appointed governor of Hadramawt publicly placed responsibility for the shutdown of PetroMasila on Bin Habreesh's tribal alliance, arguing that their sudden deployment of armed men into the oil facilities forced the company to halt production to prevent a potential disaster. He stressed that even minor clashes near fuel and gas infrastructure could trigger catastrophic damage, describing PetroMasila as the only major energy hub in the governorate. The governor said his administration has been working to defuse tensions through dialogue, sending community leaders to pressure Bin Habreesh's forces to withdraw so operations can resume. Presenting himself as a stabilizing figure, he urged all parties to avoid escalation and insisted that restoring calm is essential to preserving Hadhramaut's long-standing reputation as one of Yemen's most peaceful regions.

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Forecasting Hadramawt's Next Phase

The crisis in Hadramawt is fluid, and no scenario is predetermined. Based on the balance of forces, regional interests, and the behavior of local actors so far, three broad trajectories appear most plausible.

The first scenario envisions a decisive military defeat for Amr bin Habreesh and the 1st MRC, leading to the consolidation of STC and UAE-aligned authority across the whole of Hadramawt, not only the coast and PetroMasila. In this trajectory, the SSB and allied southern units capitalize on their current momentum and superior equipment to push bin Habreesh's forces out of key sectors, from the PetroMasila fields and their transport routes to strategic nodes in Mukalla, Sayoun, Shibam, and the wider Wadi and desert districts. In this scenario, the 1st MRC would withdraw from Sayoun and initially reposition westward, likely toward the Al-Abr region, or eastward in Al-Mahra, before eventually redeploying to a different front altogether. At this point, no evidence suggests that the tribes aligned with Bin Habreesh or the 1st MRC will attempt to oppose the STC-backed convoys. Critical facilities, including the Dabbah terminal, remain under their control, and PetroMasila eventually falls under a restructured oil protection force that in practice reports to the same Emirati-backed security network.

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Saudi-aligned factions protest politically but refrain from military intervention, allowing the STC-UAE bloc to consolidate its grip. Bin Habreesh retreats to tribal strongholds in Ghayl bin Yameen, the interior valleys, and the desert periphery, relying increasingly on diaspora funding and informal economic networks to sustain his influence. Over time, some elements around him may drift toward tacit cooperation with AQAP or clandestine Houthi channels, not out of ideological conviction but out of a shared interest in harassing UAE-aligned forces that now dominate the governorate. Continued confrontation risks further alienating Hadramis from the STC and undermining its vision of a unified southern state. The cost of this scenario is that although the STC and UAE secure control over Hadramawt's major cities, transport corridors, oil installations, and coastal infrastructure, they inherit a long-term and deeply rooted low-intensity security challenge in the vast interior, one that is difficult to fully suppress and could persist for years.

If the confrontation continues, STC-aligned forces may push more Hadramis away, jeopardizing the movement's ambition to unify the south under its leadership.

The second scenario is a limited STC victory around PetroMasila and the southern belt combined with a managed political exit for bin Habreesh. Here, UAE-backed forces entrench themselves along the N4 corridor, secure Mukalla and Dabbah, and establish sustainable control over PetroMasila through a mix of military presence and negotiated arrangements. In parallel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE quietly agree that removing both bin Habreesh and Abu Ali al-Hadhrami from the immediate battlefield would lower the risks of uncontrolled escalation. Bin Habreesh is offered a package of guarantees and a political role in IRG, while Abu Ali al-Hadhrami redeployed to Abu Dhabi or another theater. This scenario depends heavily on the willingness of both men to leave and on the ability of their patrons to manage tribal reactions inside Hadramawt. It reduces the risk of open fighting but leaves underlying tensions over local representation, smuggling economies, and resource sharing unresolved. New figures would eventually emerge to represent the same interests.

The third scenario is a prolonged political stalemate in which the STC retains military superiority on the ground, but no side is able or willing to impose a decisive outcome. In this trajectory, the coastal belt remains under STC and UAE influence, while inland valleys and desert regions stay under a mix of government, NSF, First Military Region, and tribal forces influenced by Saudi Arabia and local elites. A key element here is that while many assume Saudi Arabia will not allow the UAE-backed STC to take control of northern Hadramawt, Riyadh's slow and ambiguous public stance may be interpreted either as weakness or as quiet approval of the unfolding events.

PetroMasila might be subject to intermittent blockades, negotiations, and power sharing arrangements, but outright control by one side proves too costly. The government continues to avoid clear positions, fearing that confronting the STC could destabilize Aden. Governor Khanbashi works to mediate, but his success is partial and fragile. AQAP and the Houthis remain spoilers at the margins, using the ongoing fragmentation to recruit, spread their narratives, and occasionally stage attacks that remind all actors how fragile the situation is.

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Commentary

Hadramawt has become the central testing ground for how Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates will navigate their competing interests in Yemen after a decade of war. This turning point unfolds as the world watches Riyadh and Abu Dhabi take opposite positions in Sudan, underscoring the widening gap in their regional strategies. In Yemen, the unresolved legacies of the past ten years have converged on Hadramawt, from Hadi's arbitration deal with the HTC to the rise of parallel security forces along the coast. These accumulated dynamics now narrow toward a single strategic question: who will control PetroMasila, the routes that connect it to the coast and the interior, and ultimately the political future of Hadramawt itself.

For Amr bin Habreesh and his local and regional backers, at least in public, the confrontation represents a defense of Hadrami self-rule, tribal dignity, and a rightful share of local oil wealth. For Abu Ali Al Hadrami and the STC, it is an effort to build a southern security architecture capable of anchoring their political project while confronting AQAP and smuggling networks. For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the struggle centers on security, influence, borders, and energy. For AQAP and the Houthis, the turmoil offers an opportunity to weaken rivals and advance their agendas beneath the cover of instability. The timing of this escalation is debated. Some argue it has been inevitably building. Others point to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's call for U.S. involvement in Sudan as a trigger for UAE recalculation. Many believe all actors in Hadramawt are maneuvering ahead of potential Saudi-Houthi peace talks. In that scenario, whoever holds PetroMasila and the broader Hadramawt landscape will enter the next phase with decisive leverage over southern Yemen.

Behind the competing stories of AQAP, smuggling routes, and authority lies a quieter truth: the race to carve out the future map of Yemen has already begun.

The potential outcomes all carry serious risks. A clear STC victory could spark long-term tribal resistance across the desert. Forcing rival leaders into exile may simply replace personalities while leaving deeper structural tensions unresolved. A prolonged stalemate risks normalizing fragmentation and giving AQAP and other extremist groups wider room to operate. Continued confrontation by STC-aligned forces may further alienate Hadramis and weaken the STC's long-held aspiration to unify the south under its leadership. As long as Hadramawt's oil corridor sits between competing spheres of influence, and as long as local tribal economies depend on informal networks the state cannot easily replace, the governorate will remain at the center of Yemen's unfinished conflict.

As of 7 a.m. ET, the situation has shifted again. STC-aligned forces have mobilized a massive convoy more than 10 miles long moving toward Sayoun and the N5 highway. The convoy has been geolocated at the Rawk gas station in the Sah district of Hadramawt, less than 30 kilometers from the R5421 junction and the al-Ghuraf roundabout that links Sayoun to the west and Thamoud to the northeast via Tarim. This movement indicates that the campaign's objective may extend well beyond PetroMasila, pointing instead to what many Hadramis fear is a broader STC-UAE push to establish full control over Hadramawt before any future settlement with the Houthis.

What is clear is that this confrontation is far from resolved. The Saudi-backed response may seem slow or subdued, but it is unlikely to stay that way. In Yemen, and especially in Hadramawt, silence often precedes more deliberate action. Behind the competing stories of AQAP, smuggling routes, and authority lies a quieter truth: the race to carve out the future map of Yemen has already begun.

Author note: The questions now are whether these forces will continue mobilizing toward Al Mahra, and what impact this redeployment will have on the frontlines with the Houthis. Has shifting so many units weakened those positions, and at what cost? The situation remains fluid, and I will continue updating this article as major developments emerge.